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# THE DELIGHTS OF CHORUSSING

By W. J. LAWRENCE

TO the natural man no impulse is more difficult to resist than the desire to join in a chorus. One of the distinguishing qualities of the music-hall lies in the fact that it administers to that craving. People like to get immersed in the rhythm of a titillating ditty just as they like to fall in step. Men with a keen sense of propriety, obsessed even with the wraith of their own personal dignity, have been known after a struggle to yield themselves publicly to the impulse. They were victims of collective psychology, or what is more popularly known as "the law of the crowd." It is now clearly recognised that to bring people together in considerable numbers is to less their normal intellectuality and to increase their sensuous perceptions and their emotional energy. As Mr. A. B. Walkley puts it "the crowd has the credulity, the absence of judicial faculty, the uncontrolled violence of a feeling of a child." In our day there is, however, one serious check upon this momentary weakening of self-control. With the advance of civilisation the tendency has been to repress all manifestations of emotion, especially in public. I am convinced that much of the neurasthenia of the hour is due to this mistaken trend. Doctors should prescribe hearty laughter as an antidote.

Former ages had a saner standard of good breeding. We are apt to marvel over the compelling magnetism of the great players of the eighteenth century in being able to move strong men to tears; but the truth is, human nature at bottom being always the same, their powers were no greater than those possessed by the few highly gifted theatrical geniuses of today. The difference lies entirely in the attitude of the audience.

Although stoicism neither began nor ended with Zeno and his disciples, it may safely be predicted that the earlier the period in the world's history the nearer to the surface and the less restrained were the natural emotions. But, strangely enough, when we come to apply this conclusion to the common impulse towards chorussing, the argument, possibly from lack of full acquaintance with the characteristics of remoter times, falls to the ground. Most people would be inclined to say that if ever there was an

age when the natural man reigned supreme it was the Elizabethian age. Assuredly there was little toleration for the "prunes and prisms" propaganda in that blunt-spoken era when the Virgin Queen set the fashion by indulging in full-mouthed oaths in her moments of passion. Song was very popular in those days in the open-roofed playhouses on the Bankside. The true musical comedy was seen then by the gallants in the private theatres, and has seldom been seen since. Nothing is so certain as that the Tarletons of that multicolored day indulged their admirers with all the comic ditties of the hour. But the strange thing is that, remarkable as were the Bankside groundlings for turbulence and unrestraint, we gain no hint in the abounding pamphlets of the period of any participation on their part in the delights of chorussing. Yet there must have been many songs, with a "terry derry ding, terry derry ding, terry derry dino," such as those so inappropriately sung by Valerius in Heywood's tragedy, *The Rape of Lucrece*, which lent themselves readily to the practice. Neither Stephen Gosson in *The Schoole of Abuse* nor Dekker in his ironical instructions to the budding playgoer in his *Gul's Hornbooke* has aught to say of any such habit. Gayton, who wrote at a somewhat later period and who is equally illuminative is also equally silent. Perhaps the conclusion forced on the inquirer is as fallacious as caution and experience would lead us to believe. However that may be, one thing at least is certain: the practice of chorussing never gained material sway in the English theatre. The national temperament—that curious quality of reserve and self-isolation for which the Englishman is noted—formed an effective barrier. If it be asked, then, why should the custom have sprung up in the English music-hall, one might find an answer in the study of origins. The music-hall was an organised development of the old Free-and-Easy held in the bar-parlours of taverns, and the frequenters of the Free-and-Easy not only habitually joined in the chorus, but occasionally provided the songs.

That the custom was unknown in England in 1711 is shown by an experience related by Addison in the 29th number of *The Spectator*. In discussing opera generally, the serene-minded essayist writes:

The Musick of the French is indeed very properly adapted to their pronunciation and accent. as their whole opera wonderfully favours the genius of such a gay, airy people. The chorus in which that opera abounds, gives the parterre frequent opportunities of joining in consort with the stage. This inclination of the audience to sing along with the actors so prevails with them, that I have sometimes known the performer on the stage do no more in a celebrated song than the clerk of a parish

church, who serves only to raise the Psalm, and is afterwards drown'd in the musick of the congregation.

We have here a hint that the national equation proves a differentiating factor in the uprise of playgoing customs and the amusements of a people. The French are undoubtedly "a gay airy people." So, too, in the regions south of the Boyne, are the Irish; and it is in a Dublin music-hall that chorussing, this practice of drowning the singer, is most heartily indulged in. Nowhere else does the audience carol with the same verve and gusto.

Not long after Addison embalmed his impressions curious advantage was taken in Paris of the French predilection for chorussing. With the view of suppressing the comedians who played in booths at the great annual fairs of Saint Germain and Saint Laurent, the Royal Academy of Music, otherwise the controllers of the Opera, exercised their prerogative and forbade the comedians from favouring their patrons with any singing. Highly ingenious was the method whereby the harried players evaded the issue. When a juncture came in the performance when one of the characters should have sung a song, a large scroll descended from the sky-borders on which was inscribed in bold letters the words of the ditty. Then the orchestra proceeded to play the air and the audience, having caught its rhythms, sang the song. Meanwhile the silenced actor went on with the dumb shew of his part. All the world and his wife were attracted by this novelty. So far from injuring the mummers, the Royal Academy of Music had done them service. Such were the first faint beginnings of that delightful genre known as *opéra-comique*.

With one accord, all the French historians of the theatre have adjudged this device of evasion purely indigenous. As a matter of fact the idea was borrowed from Italy and probably owed its transplantation to the Italian mimes who frequented the fairs. Hogarth, in the opening chapter of his *Memoirs of the Musical Drama* (1838) writes:

Towards the end of the seventeenth century a species of entertainment was introduced at Venice which was for a short time in great vogue. It consisted of little dramas, in which the actors appeared on the stage without speaking. Scrolls descended from the roof upon their heads in succession, in which were written, in large letters, verses of songs, the airs of which were played by the orchestra, while the words were sung by the spectators; the performers on the stage, meanwhile, carrying on the action in dumb shew. The spectators found it very amusing to sing, in this manner, the dialogue of the piece, but soon began, doubtless, to think it somewhat childish; for the 'scroll-pieces' did not long remain in fashion.

It would doubtless be considering too curiously to infer that the first recorded instances of chorussing in an English audience were due to French initiative, particularly as the conditions which evoked the chorussing were peculiarly individual. About the second decade of the eighteenth century it became usual for the members of the ancient Order of Free Masons both in London and in Dublin to visit the theatre in full regalia on St. John's Day, the period of their annual festivity. On these occasions Masonic songs were sung between the acts by the players and chorussed in pit and boxes by the brethren. Seeing that the songs were not sung in any sort of theatrical entertainment but were merely substantive ditties rendered in downright music-hall style, this may be taken as the first faint foreshadowing of the latter day music-hall habit. Of the visit paid by the Irish Free Masons to old Smock Alley on St. John's Day, June 24, 1725, we read in *The Dublin Weekly Journal*:

They all went to the Play, with their aprons, etc., the private Brothers sat in the Pit, but the Grand Master and Grand Warden, in the Government Box; at the conclusion of the play, Mr. Griffith the player, who is a Brother, sang the Free Mason's Apprentice's song, the Grand Master and the whole brotherhood joining in the chorus.

The Government box, it should be noted was the box occupied by the Lord Lieutenant on "command nights," or, in his absence, by the Lords Justices.

No rules for general playhouse conduct can be deduced from special circumstances such as these, and, although it was but a step from the chorussing of a substantive song to the chorussing of an incidental air in a theatrical entertainment, some time elapsed before it was taken. It was not till the great success of *The Beggar's Opera* had created a taste for light musical pieces that the players made any attempt to popularize the French habit of chorussing in the auditorium during the performance. When Colley Cibber's unlucky ballad-opera, *Love in a Riddle*, was first brought out at Drury Lane in January, 1729, Harper, the jolly fat comedian, was provided with a ballad-epilogue of four stanzas in which he sang:

Since songs to plays are nowadays,  
Like to your meals a salad;  
Permit us then, kind gentlemen,  
To try our skill by ballad:  
While you, to grace our native lays,  
As France has done before us,  
Belle, beau and cit from box and pit,  
All join the jolly chorus.

The chorus ran—

Then freeborn boys, all make a noise,  
As France has done before us;  
With English hearts all bear your parts,  
And join the jolly chorus.

Agreeable to command the freeborn boys made the devil of a row in the pit, but it was not of the kind anticipated. For some not too well defined reason a cabal had been organised against Cibber's piece and the result was its summary damnation. Thus what may be styled a happy misfortune negatived all possibility of the transference of the French custom to English soil. Even the Masonic practice in due course fell into desuetude. The great public was not to give way to its natural impulse towards chorussing for considerably over a century, and then only in the music-hall.

Doubtless to the great majority of my readers this paper will bear the aspect of the famous chapter "on Snakes in Iceland," inasmuch as the delights of chorussing are unknown to, or if known scorned by, the American people. Why this should be so in a country which has been the crucible of the nations I cannot pretend to determine. As a stranger without the gate, I had perforce to seek some solution of the problem from an old friend, Mr. Wm. R. McClelland of New Brunswick, N. J., who has visited in his day all the varied places of song, North, East, South and West, from Maine to California. After informing me that the practice of joining in the chorus on the part of the audience is a thing unknown, he adds:

There were developments about five or six years ago along this line. A number of singers tried to get the audience to join in the chorus and succeeded in some instances by constant plugging in obtaining a sort of lukewarm response. Vesta Victoria wheedled the audience into singing in rendering her song "Waiting at the Church," but this was merely a flash in the pan and established no kind of custom. A few American singers made a hard try but they eventually abandoned the effort as hopeless, finding the average result cold enough to freeze a geyser.

From all of which it would appear that America is considerably more than "the telephone exchange for European thought," as William Archer once styled it, and, in matters of habit has, very decidedly, a mind of its own.